Defining a Vagenre: Categories of Nudity in Feminist Performance

Dress rehearsal for luciana achugar's *OTRO TEATRO* at the Walker Art Center. Photo: Alice Gebura

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“It is misleading to label Rebecca Patek the new Ann Liv Young when the only thing that is remotely similar in their work is that they use their vaginas.” After January’s marathon session of performance-watching during the APAP conference in New York, I was trying to put words to my frustration with one artist’s work being compared to that of another simply because each includes vaginal penetration in performance. “There are many different…”

I hesitated, so my colleague Josina Manu interjected, “Genres?”

“Yes, genres of performance involving vaginas.”

“Va-genres?” she offered.

“Exactly! Many different vagenres in contemporary performance and dance. It is not just one big category of vaginas on stage.”

Since the term “vagenre” was coined last month, I’ve seen luciana achugar’s latest creation, *OTRO TEATRO*, four times at the Walker. This immersion in a specific vagenre has given me time to reflect, and I now imagine that performances using the female reproductive system can be placed within a scale of sorts, depending on more or less vaginal influence in the artistic results. Below I begin to sketch out the range of subvagenres within this broader vagenre of performance. I invite you to contribute thoughts and criticisms in order to build more comprehensive categories and further distinguish varieties within these feminist choreographic approaches.

Level 1

Performance with “frontal” nudity, completely naked or just bottomless

This category has performers naked but not relating to their genitalia. The nudity is pedestrian in delivery. The audience may witness the unique anatomical folds and nubs between performers legs, but there is no sexual energy implied in this viewing. Of course there are questions of sexual behaviors being posed in the reading of the dance but the dancing itself doesn’t emphasize the implication of the body in an erotic context (see Melinda Ring, Michelle Boulé).

Level 2

Movement vocabulary is drawn from sexual organs

This provides an expanded inclusionary experience of the body as source material for creating gestural and textural extensions of what a more “civilized” interpretation of the body may generally be. This level could have subcategories of internal versus external motivations of creating new movement vocabulary combinations. I would suggest dividing the content by Level 2/External when genitals and pubic areas are extra body parts to manipulate without eroticization (see Juliana F. May) and Level 2/Internal when energetic vibrations encouraged by exaggerating the deep sensations within the pelvic floor muscles and organs are outwardly radiated as energies to demonstrate inner desire, feminine power, and primal passion without any tactile manipulation of such areas (see luciana achugar).

Level 3
Sexual intercourse in performance

Themes in this level of vagenre performances are explicitly dealing with human sexual behaviors and strive to be able to build reasoning around the use of penetration in action towards a literal reading of the movements. Nudity is not necessary for audience to see the use of the performer's vagina in this category (see Rachel Patek).
http://vimeo.com/61192990

Level 4
Vaginal canal as place, intercourse as movement repetition, orifices as opportunity for social commentary

This is when every aspect of the vagina, its position on the body, its ability to conceal and reveal, its habitual role in human relations, and its current ability to add taboo and risk in performance, is potential content to develop in performance. This level possibly explores abstract and non-linear as well as eroticized considerations of vaginal influences as dance (see Ann Liv Young).

Level 5
Orgasm as educational tool

This is the internal made visible in real time. Acts are based in realism and take great concentration on behalf of the performers to execute for a public. There is no added eroticization of the movements. Approach can be clinical or natural. The stripping of fantasy is necessary to provide a clear and accurate depiction of the physical build-up necessary to create climax (see Annie Sprinkle).

This is not an exhaustive or historical list of artists who work in this vagenre but rather a first attempt to create language around distinguishing the multitude of approaches in response to the use of this potent female body part in performance. I made no attempt to create the equivalent category and scale for the penis.

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luciana achugar: *OTRO TEATRO*

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